



Shelf**AWARENESS**

daily enlightenment for the book trade

Winter Institute, Part 7: The Mom & Pop Store Feb 9, 2009

At the Winter Institute on Saturday, Robert Spector discussed his upcoming title, *The Mom & Pop Store: The Power and Endurance of the Small Indie Trader*, which Walker & Company will publish in September.

Acknowledging that many booksellers don't particularly like the title, Spector joked about the book "whose name cannot be mentioned." But then he defended the phrase "mom and pop," which has often been used derogatorily. With the title, he said, "I'm honoring my own mother and father," who, when Spector was a child, owned a butcher shop in a farmers' market in Perth Amboy, N.J.

"People know what you mean about a mom and pop store," he said. (He defines the term to include a range of familial relationships as well as friendships.) He argued that such retailers are "not unsophisticated" and there's "nothing nostalgic" about them. Mom and pop stores are "a big thing," he continued. "Most people [in the country] are employed by small businesses." He added, "Let's reappropriate the term."

In the introduction to his book, he noted that "mom and pop store" is a relatively new expression--the OED's first usage is from 1962--and stated that mom and pop stores "are important not only for the food, drink, clothing, and tools that they sell us, but also for providing us with intellectual stimulation, social interaction, and connection to our community. Mom & pop stores are about neighborhood, about community, about my taking care of you and your taking care of me."

Calling himself an SOB--"son of a butcher"--whose illustrious ranks include Shakespeare, Nat King Cole, Marcel Marceau, Antonin Dvorak, Julian Schnabel and Paul Castellano, Spector said that only much later, "I realized that working in the shop shaped my life and taught me life lessons and all kinds of practical wisdom."

The author of *The Nordstrom Way*, *The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence*, *Amazon.com: Get Big Fast and Category Killers*, Spector said that "the last thing I thought about writing about was my father and working in the farmers' market. My father was smart, but he was not an educated man. He couldn't define irony, but if told I was writing a book about working in the market, he would get it immediately."

For his new book, Spector said he traveled around the country the last few years, looking for "great independent stores." Among the operations he discusses in the book are three bookstores ("I'm no fool"): Village Books, Bellingham, Wash., Politics and Prose, Washington, D.C., and Octavia Books, New Orleans, La. He noted that some of the best advice he received from Jack Covert and 800-CEO-READ, which was to "get booksellers to sell your book." As a result, he has channeled bulk orders for his previous business books through 800-CEO-READ and the University Book Store in Seattle, Wash., where he lives, and when giving talks, "I've made sure indies were selling my book in the back of the room."

Most mom and pop retailers have a "singular entrepreneurial vision," he said. "They have to be special and bring something interesting to the table. They work hard and will do whatever it takes. They are passionate about what they do." Moreover, he said, "they have adapted to change in order to survive." In fact, he joked, "after the apocalypse, only cockroaches and mom and pop stores will survive. They're the only ones who can live on small sustenance."--John Mutter